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In Neighborhoods

BUILDING A HEALTHY SACRAMENTO

Students Learn Why Decisions Matter

BY EDGAR SANCHE

Attention young people: Making healthy choices means more than eating nutritious foods, not smoking and not drinking.

It also means committing to responsible decisions — such as avoiding gangs and managing your emotions — along with goal-setting and respecting yourself and others. These are among the critical lessons 40 students are learning in Healthy Choices, a class at American Legion High School in Sacramento's Oak Park.

Most of the students are trying to catch up with credits required for a diploma. Aware that previous misbehavior and poor academic decisions caused them to lag, they have modified their ways and are now determined to succeed.

“If we want to change our society, we have to start by changing the students who will go into society as adults,” says Healthy Choices teacher Damien Giacchino, of the Sacramento Chinese Community Service Center. “If we can train (K-12) students ... and equip them with skills such as social and emotional learning, health and wellness, then maybe we can see a shift in our society, our world, of healthier adults.”

American Legion is one of four South Sacramento schools where the center offers health-related education in partnership with the Sacramento City

Unified School District. The lessons are delivered by center-hired teachers, with funding from The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities Initiative.

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Damien Giacchino, Healthy Choices teacher at American Legion High School

At American Legion, Giacchino teaches during regular hours, but at other schools the program is taught after school. The curriculum varies by age group, says Kelsey Neff, program manager of social emotional learning for the nonprofit center. At Nicholas Elementary, for example, students do outdoor P.E. and study proper nutrition — a subject that used to be a low priority for some of Giacchino's students, including seniors Ulyssa Hernandez and Brelen Page, both 18.

“Mr. Damien taught me that eating fruits and smoothies is a really good decision,” says Hernandez, who now prefers McDonald's salads over Big Macs.



“This class is a big reminder every day that I should eat healthy.”

Page says he, too, stopped eating junk food after enrolling in Giacchino's elective class. But Giacchino has taught him much more than making good food choices. Making responsible decisions extends to many aspects of our well-being.

“He's a good teacher. He tells us how to get around obstacles that we may have in life,” says Page, who is college-bound.

Students in the Healthy Choices class at American Legion learn about responsible decision making, whether it's what to eat or how to manage emotions. Photo by Charles Gunn

BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

In 2010, The California Endowment launched a 10-year, \$1 billion plan to improve the health of 14 challenged communities across the state. Over the 10 years, residents, community-based organizations and public institutions will work together to address the socioeconomic and environmental challenges contributing to the poor health of their communities.



Your **ZIP code** shouldn't predict how long you'll live — but it does. Staying healthy requires much more than doctors and diets. Every day, our surroundings and activities affect how long — and how well — we'll live.

Health Happens in Neighborhoods. Health Happens in Schools.
Health Happens with Prevention.

For more about the Sacramento Chinese Community Service Center's ongoing efforts to better the community, visit:

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